Chapter I

THE COMMUNITY OF BANG CHAN

The Geographical Setting

In the populous flat central plain of Thailand where Bang Chan was located, fenceless geometric rice-fields, dotted by clumps of trees, stretch as far as the eye can see. Houses, clustering occasionally into hamlets, line the canals that serve for domestic use, drainage, irrigation and communication. A few mounded-up roads lead out from Bangkok, the national capital on the Menam Chao Phraya, the great central river.

The monsoon divides the year into three seasons: a hot and wet (late May through November); a cool and dry (December to mid-February); and a hot and dry (late February to mid-May). The temperatures range annually from 59° to 89° F. (15° to 32° C.) with monthly means of 77° to 86° F. (25° to 30° C.) (de Young:5). A drop at night averages around 18° F. (10° C.) in April, and 22° F. (12° C.) in January, while the relative humidity varies between 65 per cent and 81 per cent (Hauck, et al.:12). Rainfall averages about 50 inches a year, 40 of which fall in the wet season (Janlekha:21). Because of the run-off from the mountains in the north, once a year the Menam Chao Phraya slowly rises, fills the canals and then overflows its banks, covering the plain for hundreds of miles to a depth of three feet or more. In Bang Chan, the water stood on the land from June until January, with its peak in October. From February to May the canals ran low, and the land dried and cracked from the intense heat.

The Community

In 1954, 1700 persons (336 families) lived in Bang Chan. Muslims, comprising 10 per cent of the population, lived as fully Thai citizens in all parts of the community in economic and social symbiosis with Buddhists. A few ethnic Chinese had married into Thai families and were accepted.

The community spread over an area of about 7000 rai (1000 hectares or 4 square miles). Bang Chan Canal bissected

APPENDIX

MUSLIM CUSTOMS IN BANG CHAN

The small Muslim minority in Bang Chan though maintaining its identity, lived scattered through every hamlet, with the heaviest concentration around the mosque at the southern edge of the village. The occasional inter-marriage of Buddhist and Muslim was eventually amicably adjusted to the community and the religion. Some Buddhists manifested a veiled hostility in calling the Muslims "stingy." One said, "Muslims have expensive medicine to induce abortion, after which they might kill the baby. A Buddhist would use this medicine to help deliver, but would not dare take life." The Muslim reputation as a source for powerful magic, especially for love and sorcery, bespeaks some edginess in the relations between the 2 ethnic groups, but Buddhists sometimes sought out the benefit of this magic.

In spite of these separatist tendencies, the Muslims were fully Thai citizens, and participated as equals with the Buddhists in the economic, political and much of the social life. The 2 groups were in many respects interdependent. The Muslims did not object to taking life, so acted as butchers for the Buddhists. Muslims were frequent patients of Buddhist mō, whether priests or lay. The only Muslim who did a little curing was the To Iman, head of the mosque, but few if any Buddhists came to him for cures. Because every mō gave an annual ceremony of homage to his teacher attended by everyone who had benefited from those powers during the year, Muslims and Buddhists met amiably at several large feasts. These festivals were public displays, very competitive in feeling, of the success of the different mō. One became the largest of the village-wide festivities. Buddhist women attended the Muslim female midwife, teacher-rites, and vice versa. Buddhists and Muslims, especially the prominent families, attended each other's home ceremonies, such as weddings, tonsures, and that part of the ordination held in the home (the than khwan). Separate kitchens were established at large Buddhist ceremonies so that Muslims could safely adhere to their one dietary regulation, the avoidance of pork. No such arrangements had to be made at Muslim ceremonies for Buddhists had no food taboos, and loved Muslim cooking.

Midwifery was an area of frank, harmonious interchange, with midwives of either religion often attending women of the other. Buddhist male midwives were allowed by the Muslim husbands to attend their wives, though female attendance was preferred. Satisfaction was expressed by Buddhist women over

759 795 844 57 [852] the slight differences in ministrations. "The Muslim midwife massages more than the Buddhist." The women easily entered into reciprocal courtesies. The Muslim woman knew the steps in the Buddhist winnowing ceremony and performed them as desired. One Buddhist mother dispensed, however, with the winnowing "because the midwife was Muslim." A Buddhist woman made up the khwan khăn in the fashion specified by the Muslim midwife and participated in the latter's teacher-rite.

795 779 [794] [782] [197] Certain fundamental ideas of the Muslims led to reinterpretations of familiar Buddhist terms and activities. "Khwan" referred to the soul, but with no implication of reincarnation. "Bun," meaning "merit" to the Buddhist, meant charitable giving in the sense of tithes, for Islam prescribed that a portion of one's income be given to the poor. On the other hand, the Muslims had taken over many Buddhist practices; for one, the acceptance of Buddhist holy water as a cure for spirit attack.

795 [783] [304] [764] Completely Muslim was the stress on physical and moral purification as an objective of every rite, and conversely, the prevalence of the idea of defilement. "Circumcision is to cleanse the body before growing up," it was said. Muslim mortuary rites were elaborate procedures for purification. When a Muslim baby died, the Buddhist midwife said, "The body was cleaned before burial," implying thorough measures beyond his ordinary experience. Procreation was viewed as dangerous and contaminating. The behavior that hid sexual phenomena at the same time by constant prescriptions kept sexuality much more in mind. Muslims separated males from females, for example, at feasts. No Muslim male ever became a midwife.

795 843 844 [273] The events surrounding childbirth illustrated the differing viewpoints between Muslim and Buddhist. In the seventh month of her pregnancy, a Muslim woman called on on her chosen midwife, and gave her a gift of betel pepper leaves and areca nut to assure her services (fàk thong: to deposit gold). On returning home, she went as fast as possible "to insure fast delivery." Since Muslims frowned on liquor, their medicines were made up of hot-tasting spices in hot water. Yet one Muslim midwife prescribed large doses of liquor before and during parturition. For labor and delivery, a Muslim was stricter about utilizing the privacy of the small enclosed room, if there were one, while in the Buddhist household "it could be anywhere" in the house. Muslim men, except for husband, brother, or father, were excluded from the scene. The Muslim khwan khăn contained "7

795 844 [562]

The Muslim khwan khao contained "7 items"--a young (or ripe) coconut with its water; thread or "a skein of yarn"(used not to tie in the khwan but "for the teacher"); 7 pieces of areca nut; 7 betel pepper leaves; one "heavy" (15 gram) yellow wax candle; one "bag" of incense; rice; and 30 baht in money.[78] The khwan khao was not offered with the idea of its reaching phra In (Indra) ultimately, but rather the local princely spirits of the land, chao thi, chao thān, and Mae Thoranī (Mother Earth). It was waved 3 times by the midwife over the abdomen of the woman in labor with the prayer: "Spirits of the land, Mother Earth, may the delivery be easy!" The khwan khao was then placed at the mother's head. The woodpile was knocked over so as to point to Mecca, which was west, a direction avoided by the Buddhists. "When nearly ready to deliver, a Muslim midwife turns the mother's face in the direction where the family's hens hatch their chicks. If they have no chicken, then in any direction."[79] If delivery were slow, a Buddhist mō was called to "shift the mother to new places" until the baby came out.

Muslim women lay post-partum by a fire for the usual physiological reasons. In making up the fireplace, instead of a cluster of incense, flowers, and a candle, this purely Hindu-Brahman-Buddhist trio, they sprinkled salt "to keep away evil spirits" on the dirt at the corners. Salt, oil, or alcohol was spewed over the fire and the woman's body, or only magic was recited, "to control the poison of the fire." "Of these, salt is best," said a Muslim midwife, but "whichever a midwife used first has to be continued for the rest of her life as her way of doing things, because the habit has been started that way." The Muslim magic for controlling the fire was "ōm ming ōm fūn ōm fai sawā hāi." "So be it, stove, rocks (or mountains), fire, be cool, may a blessing rest to you," though "ōm" is the Pali-Buddhist "mystical word." The placenta was not put in a pot beside the fire, but was washed by the midwife several times until perfectly clean, then was mixed with salt and buried in the dirt directly under the fire. When the fire was finally destroyed, the placenta was dug up, washed again, and immediately buried (not in a pot), with the

---

78. There was some evidence that the thread and incense were included only when a Muslim midwife was delivering a Buddhist woman.

79. To the Muslims this was an act of imitative magic. The Buddhists saw the action of a setting hen as a quick source of information for the parturient's orientation. The hen always avoided the direction of the phī luang (Textor:378).

795 844 795 304 852 851 795 853 608 795 759

phlai and bamboo cutter under the house "so the child would not roam away from home." The circumcision (akika) performed up to the eleventh year, allied a child to a human group. "Circumcision is to accept the new-born baby into the status of human beings" In a corresponding ceremony for girls, the To Iman "cut a little piece of the labia." However, some Muslims had the full winnowing ceremony performed. If it were not, the child was raised aloft in the midwife's hands with the words, "Mother Si, Mother Sak, may this child be cool and happy!" The new-born baby was then laid in a cloth cradle. Fruits were hung over the tray or cradle. If a lactating Muslim mother accepted another's child to nurse, the 2 babies had to be of the same sex "lest later in life they marry, in which case their would be an incestuous, brother-sister marriage." The Buddhists entertained no such idea, so nursed babies of either sex as needed. A Muslim view of colostrum as "like pus from a sore" carried a more negative overtone than the Buddhist's statement: "At first the mother's milk is too dilute to be useful."

At the annual homage of a Muslim midwife to her teacher each of her patients of the year sent a kilogram of sugar, one coconut, one or 2 liters of glutinous rice, and a hen (if a baby girl had been born) or a rooster (if a boy). The chicken was killed by the midwife and made into curries for mosque officials (men) invited to the ceremony. The incense and candles were burned "while she thinks of her teacher."

4

Bangkok. The tropical monsoon climate divides the year into three seasons, a hot, wet season from late May to November, a cooler, dry season from December to early February, and a hot, dry season from late February to mid-May. The community, scattered over an area of approximately five square miles, was composed of seven neighboring hamlets. In 1954, the population was approximately 1700, divided among 336 households. About 60 per cent of the households were made up of independent families, parents with unmarried children, with an average family size of 5.7 persons. The main occupation of 80 per cent of all families was rice farming.

The climate together with the overflowing Chao Phraya river, provided natural conditions for raising a single crop of wet rice. From May or June to February, the principal activities were those connected with rice production. This crop greatly exceeded the needs for local consumption as human food, feed, and seed. The surplus of rice which was sold, was estimated for 1953 as 1.4 times the amount used for all purposes within the village (Janlekha, 1955).

Wat Bang Chan, the Buddhist monastery and place for religious exercises, was also the center of social life in the community. When data for this study were being gathered, the one primary school in the village was located on the grounds of the wat. The community was defined simply by the clientele which patronized Wat Bang Chan and this elementary school. Within the area of the community lived a small minority of Thai Moslems who patronized a mosque and school just outside Bang Chan. The few Chinese in the village were considered as part of the Thai-Buddhist community. Information to be presented on food habits refers primarily to habits of the Buddhist majority, although some reference will be made to ways in which Moslem practices differed therefrom.

Although for six or more months of the year the fields were covered with water, sometimes to a depth of a meter or more, a year-round road, connecting Bangkok and Minburi, the nearest market town, ran through one edge of the village. Bus service was available along this road, to either Bangkok or Minburi but within the community one went by boat on the network of canals during the wet season, and during the dry season, on foot along the dikes or across fields. From late January through May, when subsidiary canals were apt to be dry, getting about was somewhat difficult. Boat travel was considered easy, but as many families had only one boat, a trip to the store or even to a neighbor's home had to be planned with reference to the activities of other family members.

Large scale purchases, as for a ceremony, were always made at a big market, but in general, instead of people going to the market-town, the "market" came to the people. Boat-venders brought not only fresh produce and staples but also sweets, ices, soft drinks, and cooked foods such as Chinese

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bang Chan
Thailand AO1

whole, depends in large part on one's frame of reference.[2] In the most general terms, the people of Bang Chan are like almost all ethnic Thai peasants (excepting on some counts Thai Moslems and some of the economically disenfranchised people of the Northeast) in that they have a keen sense of membership in the nation-state with a deep loyalty to the Crown, speak the Thai language, are Therevada Buddhists, are outwardly highly deferential to the authority of the Central government, and have a conception of the good life that stresses fun, physical comfort and security, intellectual simplicity and practicality, and a moral (as contrasted with a natural) ordering of the universe. Too, like the vast majority of their rural compatriots,[3] they are engaged in the production of rice, an activity which to them is not only an economic operation (Ingram 1955, Janlekha 1955) but almost a way of life, being bound up with their social structure, dietary habits, religious practices, and even their philosophical (J. R. Hanks 1961) and aesthetic conceptions.

---

[2] For readers unfamiliar with Thailand, the nation-state, it should be noted that the country is predominantly rural; 84 percent of the total national labor force is in agriculture and there are only ten towns with populations of 20,000 people or more, in which 6 percent of the national population (1947 census) live. Although Bangkok has a population of approximately 1,200,000, the second largest city, Chiengmai, has only 60,000 (1957 estimate).

The nation also has a high degree of ethnic homogeneity, 82 percent of the population considering themselves native Thai (1957 estimate). The largest ethnic minority group is the overseas Chinese, comprising 11.3 percent of the population (1953 estimate, from Skinner 1957), the balance being Malays, Cambodians, and Indians; the so-called tribal groups number in toto only about 150,000 people.

The religious composition of the country is 94.1 percent Buddhist, 3.9 percent Moslem, 0.5 percent Christian, and 1.5 percent "others," many of whom are tribal animists. Thai Buddhism is of the Southern (Therevada, Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle") variety and as practiced by most Thai, has syncretized within it many Brahmanic and traditional Southeast Asian animistic elements (see the chapter on "Religion" in Sharp *et al.* 1956, and Textor 1960). The largest minority religion, Islam, is practiced by ethnic Malay living in the four southernmost provinces of Thailand, as well as by some ethnic Thai—many of them descendants of former Malay slaves or war prisoners—scattered through the areas north and east of Bangkok, including Bang Chan, where they comprise 9.8 percent of the local population. Relationships between Buddhists and Moslems, at least in Bang Chan, are quite amicable and except for ideal prohibitions against intermarriage and occasional offhand remarks such as "Moslem women are loose" or "Moslems kill animals," there is little overt hostility between the two groups. Certainly few Bang Chaners ever distinguish between their Buddhist and Moslem neighbors when arranging a work group, selecting a drinking partner, or even compiling a guest list for a son's ordination.

[3] Janlekha (in Sharp *et al.* 1953: 110) indicates that 55 percent of the total national labor force is involved *solely* in the cultivation of rice—which occupies approximately 90 percent of the total cultivated land area—and as many as 92 percent of all agricultural households are rice households. The 55 percent figure excludes all those people who are involved in the transportation, milling, storing, and distribution of rice. Eighty-five percent of the population of Bang Chan (1953) are rice farmers.